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ABSTRACT

Collaborations between schools and parents, and schools and other institutions, seek to improve or expand available resources. This issue of "Focus in Change" focuses on two elementary schools with different models of collaboration in place. At Columbia Park Elementary School (Maryland) parents have been involved in site-based management teams since 1985. Principal Patricia Green shares her perspective on the changes she initiated when she was appointed principal. Virginia Walker, a parent who now coordinates Columbia Park's afterschool program, describes barriers that parents encounter as they step forward into more prominent school roles. A different sort of partnership has been established at the Denali Elementary School in Fairbanks (Alaska) where a principal worked with parents, teachers, and university faculty to establish a university-elementary school collaboration through which university faculty deliver substantive inservices in science and math--which teachers take for college credit--as well as coteach elementary school classes. Douglas Schamel, a biology instructor at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and participant in the collaboration since its inception, shares his perceptions of the process of teaching science to elementary school teachers. Denali's principal, David Hagstrom, comments on the university-school partnership. The issue includes suggestions for further reading on the subject of school-community collaboration. (MLF)

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# FOCUS IN CHANGE

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT FALL 1991 NO. 4

## School-Community Collaboration

Collaboration between schools and businesses is not new (Cuban, 1983). However, fresh interest in imaginative types of collaborative ventures has encouraged school leaders to conceptualize collaborative partnerships more broadly—whether their intent is to expand resources available to the school, meet a particular curricular or instructional goal, or try to link youth more efficaciously to social service delivery using the school site as a hub.

Sketched very broadly, there are three basic types of collaboration: 1) partnerships or linkages between schools and social service agencies to expand or improve social service delivery, especially for at-risk youth; 2) collaboration with the goal of improving curriculum (which may draw upon university faculty, businesspeople, or other resources), and 3) parental involvement which may include a voice in school governance or leadership (G. G. Wehlage, personal communication, July 9, 1991).

All have a common underpinning: They seek to improve or expand available resources, looking imaginatively beyond the traditional structure of schooling for solutions to persistent problems.

But these collaborations raise interesting issues. In partnerships that are developed between universities and schools, can university faculty work successfully with school staff in a manner that fully meets staff needs? How can commitment from both teachers and faculty be secured and who determines a program's goals? Finally, how can faculty overcome the often-cited, age-old schism between theory and practice?

Similarly, what type of parental participation in schooling is the key to positive home-school relations? How does a school succeed in securing parental involvement in governance, given different levels of parent sophistication and education? In what ways do school leaders work successfully with a diverse mix of teachers, parents, support staff, and community leaders to insure that the broader community has a voice in the school's decisions? Do teachers chafe when an already crowded schedule must extend to an aggressive campaign to welcome parents into not just the school, but the decisions that propel the school?

In this newsletter we focus on two elementary schools with different models of collaboration in place. At Columbia Park Elementary School in Prince George's County, Maryland, parents have been involved in site-based management teams since 1985. Patricia Green, the principal who implemented a district imperative, reflects on the change process and a new sense of community that has developed in the school.

Also from Columbia Park Elementary School, we hear the voice of Virginia Walker, a parent who has organized other parents, nudging them into a stronger say in the day-to-day functioning of their children's school. Walker, who now coordinates Columbia Park's after-school program, speaks with insight about barriers that parents encounter as they step forward into more prominent school roles.

A different sort of partnership has been established at the Denali Elementary School in Fairbanks, Alaska, where a principal worked with parents, teachers, and university faculty to establish a university-elementary school collaboration through which university faculty deliver substantive inservices in science and math—which teachers take for college credit—as well as co-teach elementary school classes.

Douglas Schamel, a Biology Instructor at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and participant in the collaboration since its inception, shares his perceptions of the process of teaching science to elementary school teachers. He is candid about obstacles to authentic inservice, and creative in the solutions he developed to overcome them.

We also hear from Denali's principal, David Hagstrom, who pioneered the university-school partnership and whose efforts have been rewarded with a $750,000 grant for the Denali School from the Nabisco Corporation to support their restructuring efforts. The Denali School will cast its collaborative net more widely to include members of the Native Alaskan community, some of whom will live and teach at the school.

Finally, we provide an annotated bibliography on parental involvement and guidelines to working with parents in shared decision-making roles.

Cuban, L. (1983, Winter). Corporate involvement in public schools: A practitioner-academic's perspective. *Teachers College Record, 85*(2), 183-203.

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*"We are all teachers of children."*



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# Sharing Responsibility



*One imaginative use of previously untapped resources in a community is the inclusion of parents in site-based management. At Columbia Park Elementary School in Landover, Maryland, a district commitment to site-based management fused with a creative principal. The result: An unprecedented level of parental involvement in their children's schooling coupled with a new, warm sense of community. In this article, Patricia Green, principal of Columbia Park Elementary School, shares her perspective of the changes she initiated when she was appointed principal in 1985.*

Six years ago, Columbia Park Elementary School in Prince George's County, Maryland, was located in a neighborhood riddled with crime and fear, a neighborhood where drug-related murders were all too frequent, where broken windows, boarded-up houses, and overflowing dumpsters were a barren, dangerous backdrop through which the school's population of approximately 470 children walked to school.

Not only the neighborhood was depressed. Students' performance on standardized achievement tests was poor, well below national norms. Parent involvement was minimal; a PTA existed in name only. Other types of parental involvement espoused by the school reform movement—such as a voice in school governance—did not exist. Parents had little or no influence in determining how the school where their children were enrolled should be governed.

Today, although demographics haven't changed — the school still has an annual approximate 42% turnover rate in its population—Columbia Park's measurable gains are impressive: Third graders who took the California Achievement Tests the last time they were administered scored in the 98th percentile nationwide and their total test battery netted them a noteworthy place in the 87th percentile. Fifth graders—across the board—scored at the 83rd percentile.

The neighborhood surrounding the school is clean; boarded-up houses have been renovated and painted. The community and school work together on a drug education effort that emphasizes developing resistance to the drug culture.

And parents are involved in school governance and decision-making, sitting on school teams that make the decisions that influence the day-to-day functioning of the school.

In philosophy, Columbia Park subscribes to a combination of two models, the Effective Schools Model and the Comer Process. In a firm and energetic voice, Pat Green, Columbia Park's principal, explains the change effort initiated when she began as principal in 1985.

"We've used the two models in tandem, and we've seen remarkable changes," she begins. "We started with the Effective Schools Model, focusing on the seven correlates, and at the same time infused the Comer Process and its emphasis on the quality of the relationships and climate of the school as well as its outreach into the community."

### *Parental Involvement on Teams*

The major decision-making body for the school is its School Planning and Management Team (SPMT), which meets biweekly after school. The team is comprised of approximately 10 community-selected representatives from what Green terms "the broad school community." It has three functions, which include assessing the social climate of the school, assessing the academic climate of the school, and developing an annual school improvement plan that includes objectives, activities, a timetable, and an evaluation of the plan's success.

The participation of timid or reticent parents is invited and welcomed. Although parent representatives are selected by parent groups, such as the PTA, the opportunity to participate in the SPMT is publicized in a school newsletter, published biweekly, that goes to parents.

Green emphasizes, "If parents sign up, we always call them so that they know they are welcome." Minutes from each meeting are also published so that parents who are not representatives can be informed.

SPMT members include two or three parents, who might rotate times that they can attend, representatives of the community's civic organization, the school's support staff, Chapter I, and the teaching staff, as well as a guidance counselor and Green, who acts as team facilitator.

The civic organization's representative is included, Green says, because "not everybody in the broader community has a child in the school, and these members of the community may have other sets of needs that they would like to address since the school is in the community."

Decisions are made in a fashion that emphasizes shared responsibility. The SPMT meets once in the summer to establish the year's social calendar and begin planning the next school year. "We analyze data and set goals," Green adds. "Those goals are instructional goals that take place within the building. We come to decisions by consensus, not by voting, because if you take a vote, unless it's 100% in one direction, you'll have winners and losers. Someone is going to feel that their point of view wasn't heard.

"If we can't reach consensus, we set up a task force or subcommittee to study the issue a little more broadly and get other people involved in it, look-

ing at alternatives. They bring their work back to the STMP. We've never taken a vote on this team, and we've been using this process for five years."

Another group, the Student-Staff-Services team (called the Triple S), has a mission more specific to individual students' problems as well as broad issues that affect the school's functioning, such as discipline. Comprised of representatives from central office, the school psychologist, the community health nurse, the pupil/personnel worker, the guidance counselor who also serves on the STMP, and Green as team facilitator, it meets weekly and attempts to act in a preventive mode before problems become acute.

Parents, while not serving formally on the Student-Staff-Services team, are invited to attend. Green is convinced it is necessary to have some overlap between team members from both teams. "The counselor and I hear the discussions from both teams. When the Student-Staff-Services team meets, again we try to include different perspectives. We can look at things from a very narrow point of view as school-based people, as classroom teachers, as principals, and yet somebody else can look at the same situation from a different perspective and have input that can actually change how you resolve whatever the dilemma or problem was."

Classroom teachers are also included if an individual child is being discussed. "We always want to have a classroom teacher's perspective," Green explains, "so we cover the class either with a substitute or a team member so that the teacher can provide input and also be a part of whatever the solutions are that we develop."

Critics of parental involvement in site-based management might suggest that parents' lack of formal training in education as well as limited experience making budgetary decisions can only be problematic. Green is quick to disagree.

"People on the team are part of a process," she emphasizes, "and they don't just walk into the room and make a decision on a million-dollar activity. The people who are on the team are involved in the program and the processes that we utilize.

"They're not strangers. Team members have a comfort level with trust, with being open, and they feel that they don't have to say 'yes' to everything that the school is saying."

### *Working Together: Building from Consensus*

Trust and a "comfort level" are integral to the team process, Green believes. "If any of us raises an issue that others are not comfortable with, that issue is discussed fully. The reasons behind why someone doesn't feel comfortable are also discussed."

She points to the revamping of the school's handbook as a concrete example of the team process. "There used to be a 45-page handbook that was designed by the school, written by the school, and dispensed by the school to the parents. The parents shared with us that they felt intimidated by the handbook. It smacked of the school's authority and didn't include the kinds of things that were important to the parents.

"To be able to say that in a team setting means a trust level has evolved, and that comes from feeling that others are listening to you. It also comes from looking at things as no-fault situations. In other words, the parents might say, 'This is how things have been. Can we work this problem out?' "

Green is pleased that the school's reaction to parents' input was not defensive. "Parents said that the handbook was an intimidating document, that they didn't have time to flip through 45 pages. Therefore, we included parents as we designed a two-pocket folder that had information printed directly on it that parents thought was important to them, in a format that was easy to read and easy to access. Important papers, such as report cards, can be stored in the pockets."

### *Breaking Down Barriers*

How are parents assimilated on the team? Green credits an overall change in school climate. "It's not unusual for staff to call a parent not because there's a problem, but to make the parent aware that his or her child did a nice job on a project. You don't wait for a problem to touch base with parents. It's the same thing with people you want to welcome onto a team. You don't wait until they're at a meeting. You build relationships, you're out on the corner as parents come to pick their children up, you're out in the community, you're engaging them in conversation and inviting them to come to meetings just to see what we do."

### *School-Based Management: The Inception*

But despite Green's success with the challenges presented by school-based management, its inception presented some difficulties. "The first year we had never done this before. It was the first year I was at Columbia Park, and I wanted staff and parents involved in this decision-making process. I had never been a principal before, and this was the concept I wanted to see in place. Our superintendent, John Murphy, had trained us all as principals to do this."

However, it can take time and training to achieve true participatory decision-making, as Green explains in a wry tone. "You can't just say, now we're going to have school-based management and you're going to be empowered. It doesn't happen that way. In the early days, I as facilitator would say something and there would be some dialogue but almost anything I said was rubberstamped.

"It took time before the staff realized that they had an opportunity to

make changes. At this point, school-based management is really the heart and soul of the school."

*Greater Sense of Community*

Greater parental involvement has succeeded in creating a more intimate sense of community within the school, Green attests. "When youngsters see their parents in positive relationships with school people, it creates an ethos in a school. It's a very positive statement to children. Children in today's world need much more guidance and support from adults, and when they can see the adults in their lives as partners in positive ways, whether it's through conferences or parents stopping by or meeting casually with a teacher, those kinds of interactions are very powerful statements to children. They realize that not only is this a place for them, but it's a *family* place."

The insistance on closeness and familial relationships between parents, staff, and children extends to Columbia Park's PTA. As Green explains, "There wasn't a PTA in the school when I came. We built it very slowly that first year, but on a very strong foundation. After listening to what parents had to say, we changed what we were doing. Parents found it difficult to come out in the evening. Many of them hold two jobs, or they may be a one-parent family, or they work so hard during the day they're exhausted at night.

"Our parents said that the typical arrangement of a babysitting room at PTA meetings separates families. In the Comer Process, you emphasize families. So our PTA meetings are a family affair. We set it up in such a way that it relates to the expressed needs of parents. We encourage them to bring the children. After a general session on whatever the topic is—perhaps reading skills, summer math help, the science fair—we break into grade-level designations. Parents move to one or two sessions that relate to the grade level of one or two of their children. Teachers work collaboratively with parents to plan these sessions. We get tremendous turnouts for them, and they influence what's happening in the classroom. Parents ask what they can do at home to help their children.

"When preparing for their standardized tests, we have Saturday sessions and open up the computer lab so that youngsters could get more practice on their tables and division. I encourage parents to come with them."

*Parents and Curriculum*

Parents influence curriculum indirectly. "When we look at curriculum, we look at curriculum in totality. When we talk to the parent, we realize that he or she can help unlock some doors to us that may be closed as we try to understand that total child. What is the child like at home when the child is doing homework? The parent can often give us input that will help us modify a program for that particular child in the classroom. I wouldn't say that parents have had an impact on changing the entire curriculum, but they have very specific things they share with us that modify a program for their particular child."

In addition, parents can influence book selection, although textbook selection is set by the county. "Since our population is predominately African-American, we're involved in multicultural infusion programs at our school. We want to insure that our youngsters have a very strong emphasis on the history from Africa, not just the time since blacks were in America."

Parents sit on Columbia Park's multicultural infusion committee, and

## *Selected School-Based Factors to Encourage Parental Involvement*

1. Establish a school atmosphere where parents are welcomed and encouraged to be involved in their children's education.
2. Include school staff in a proactive role that solicits and welcomes parental input.
3. Encourage a non-defensive school climate in which "no-blame" statements can be made and a problem-solving mode for both staff and parents can be adopted.
4. Realize that the degree and intensity of parental involvement will vary, due to parents' schedules, commitments, and activities. However, work to include parents whenever possible in school activities.
5. Establish a "comfort level" for staff and parents so that individuals can express their true opinions, knowing that they will be respected.

attend workshops with Green and members of the teaching staff. Green maintains that their involvement has been helpful in selecting materials. "They've taken training with us, and we go to special workshops on multicultural education so we can all share viewpoints with each other."

Have teachers resisted increased contact and time spent with parents? Green's response is candid. "If the principal clearly delineates the vision for the school, teachers are going to embrace that vision. If they don't, they probably will not want to stay there because they will not feel comfortable. What I've experienced at our school is that this staff clearly knew from the very beginning what our superintendent's vision was. I contributed how I saw our school fitting into his vision and then asked staff to display how they could fit into it."

Parenthetically, she adds, "This is a staff that bends over backwards to involve parents, to call them at home during lunch to tell them that their child did well on a project."

Green reflects further on the transformational nature of leadership. "If it's not communicated to teachers that the leadership of a school would like something done, and expects it, and it's important, you're not necessarily going to see it done on a consistent basis. You will have superstars who do it, but you're not going to have clear-cut patterns of people doing it. In our school, people perform up to expectations because they work as a team and they see the importance of it."

Shared values are powerful transformational devices, Green believes. "Everybody models for everybody else. We don't look at job descriptions in a traditional fashion. We're all teachers of children, and that's a philosophy that permeates the school. At any moment, I might find myself picking up a mop in the cafeteria or a teacher might need to get between two youngsters who are ready to punch each other out. But people are empowered to make a difference in the lives of children, and not just in each other's classrooms."

In six years, the school has made substantial changes. "There was no PTA in 1985," Green remembers, "and this PTA has won award after award for their parent involvement. We recently wrote a grant for $250,000 from the county government for an afterschool program to keep our youngsters from 3 p.m. until 6 p.m. I hired one of the parents from the community to coordinate the program *[see next article]* and then hired several people from the community to be group activity leaders."

Discipline has changed as well. "In 1985, looking back for the previous five years, between 18-22 youngsters per year were suspended for serious discipline problems. There was no schoolwide discipline program in place. It dramatically dropped to four youngsters who were suspended, and has maintained very low numbers. This year we had one youngster who was suspended. We have a consistent policy throughout the school in terms of what we expect from youngsters. There is a tremendous emphasis on reinforcing what children do well."

Although Green is proud of Columbia Park's success, she points to sustaining momentum as a challenge. "How do you set new goals?" she asks rhetorically. "The most challenging thing that has happened here is continuing to motivate ourselves when we know that we're doing a good job."

But insistance on continuous improvement fuels staff and parents alike, Green believes. "There's always room to improve, because we're part of a process. Every group of youngsters is different from the last group of youngsters. We must constantly refine and change what we do to meet the needs of the group." ■

*What was it like for parents to sit on site-based management teams? In the next article, Virginia Walker shares her experiences as a parent who drew on her knowledge of her community — and her own reserves of commitment — to become a community organizer of other parents.*

Virginia Walker, a mother of three who was an early advocate for parental inclusion in their children's schooling at Columbia Park Elementary School, has a soft voice that communicates boundless energy and enthusiasm coupled with a keen sense of humor. Today she coordinates Columbia Park's after-school program and takes visible satisfaction in the school's inclusion of parents in its governance and management, especially when she contrasts its present commitment to parental involvement to the time prior to 1985 when her daughter first enrolled.

"Parent involvement wasn't welcomed," she says flatly. "The impression that parents got through actual words and body language was, 'Okay, drop them off at the door, go home and watch TV or something, they're in *our* hands now.' Several different people actually said, 'They are in school now. We are in charge. You can go now.'"

But Walker persisted. "My daughter's teachers found out I was a help, not a hindrance, so I started going on field trips and coming to parties. Finally I was actually in the room helping with different groups."

Walker candidly refers to her efforts as "getting in good with the teachers" and says a few other parents used the same strategy. However, despite parents' initiatives, she claims that parents' involvement was spotty and too dependent on the good will and positive attitude of individual teachers. Overall, an opportunity for parents to be involved in the day-to-day educatonal experience offered by

Columbia Park was not available.

*A Change Agent*

The appointment of Patricia Green as principal precipitated dramatic changes in old attitudes and stubbornly held beliefs. Walker explains, "When Mrs. Green came, there was a PTA in name only. We were on the books, but the membership was maybe 20 or 30. She came to the open house and asked for a more active PTA."

Walker acknowledges that innovations take time. "Mrs. Green's willingness to involve parents made the process take less time than it would have normally taken. If the principal is open to parent involvement, then the rest of the people will follow"

As she dryly points out, "Before Mrs. Green came, there were three different kinds of teachers. There were the kind who knew that the only way to have a successful year was to involve parents, and they did it on their own, in their individual classrooms.

"Then there were teachers who wanted to have *nothing* to do with parents. Finally, there was the third group of teachers who would sway whichever way the majority was going."

Green was successful mobilizing a majority of teachers behind her new vision for the school, Walker says—"into a strong front"—and it then became easier for Walker to marshall parents.

*A Strategy for Involvement*

Her strategy was practical: She made herself accessible and visible wherever parents were present. "This is a dangerous neighborhood, so parents walk their kids to school or have other people walk them to school. I stood out in front of the school with a clipboard asking if they would like to help with projects, such as a book fair. To involve parents with the SPMT *[the major school governance team]*, Mrs. Green and I talked to people, pointing out the parent representatives, telling parents to take their concerns and comments to them.

"Mrs. Green has written newsletters with a little flyer at the bottom saying, 'Would you like to come, even if it is just to observe? Whatever you have to offer is welcome!' "

Once parents responded to a newsletter, signed up or mentioned any interest, they received a follow-up phone call from a member of the school's staff. Walker says that the power of such school-initiated overtures was tremendous, and helped parents feel more comfortable with school staff, who were frequently perceived as authority figures. "Just having someone put their hand out and say 'Hi' makes a 100% difference," she points out.

Parental involvement can break down at different stages due to tensions, communication problems, and long-held beliefs on the part of both teachers and parents. Walker claims that a core reason for tension is that both parents and teachers can feel unsure with one another and easily intimidated. "A lot of professionals feel threatened because there is so much publicity about parents, so they feel we may be there to cause problems.

"And a lot of parents are threatened because teachers are professionals. About 30% of our parents may not have finished high school and they feel intimidated by professional people. They don't know what to do, especially if the other person doesn't make the first overture."

A bristling array of school rules and regulations are another hurdle for parents to overcome. "When a parent comes to a school, the school gives him or her a list of rules and regulations. You don't feel you have a say, even though your taxes pay for the school system."

Plus, the power of parents' previous personal school experiences can color their desire to participate in their child's education. "Some of us cannot get over the horrible experiences we had in school," Walker points out. "We can't see the advantages to participation. Some parents have not seen how their involvement could benefit their kids."

Yet another, impenetrable barrier to parental involvement is the economy. "I have a man on my list," Walker states, "who has only been able to do one thing in two years because of timing. He goes to work at 7 a.m., gets off at 3 p.m., goes to his other job by 4 p.m., and gets off at midnight. He must work like this so that his family will survive."

She gives an example of how parents changed a policy. "Parents started talking about how it was too late to do anything about a low grade by the time they got the interim grade report. So they decided to give this problem to the SPMT representative who happened to be standing there. We said we really needed weekly reports and if we knew what was going on at school we could help them at home.

"We took the issue to the SPMT and talked about the pros and cons. We came to the consensus that we would give it a trial period of four to six weeks. At the end of the second or third week we started getting reports. They came by phone, orally when we were walking the kids to school and by notes through the PTA mailbox. The parents loved it!

"So at the meeting where the trial period was discussed, we had a huge turnout. All the parents wanted to keep the weekly reports. All of the teachers said it was too much paperwork.

"Finally we reached compromise. We agreed we would continue it, but for some classes, it would be biweekly. For classes where it was weekly, it would be an established form on which teachers would just put grades and comments. So far, both teachers and parents love it."

Why is Walker such an advocate for parental involvement in their children's

education? Her answer comes from the heart. "This is my *child* to whom I gave birth. We were inseparable for the first five years. Now, all of a sudden I am supposed to give her to some strangers for six whole hours and not know what's going on? I didn't like that! I didn't feel that I had the *right* to give my child to somebody else."

And advocacy did not come easily to Walker, who, by nature, is shy. "Very, very, *very* shy!" she asserts. "But my kid was picked on a couple of times in school and I refused to allow it. Children are too little to speak for themselves. Somebody has to speak for them until they are big enough."

### *Guiding Parents Into New Roles*

Walker encourages parents to assimilate into new roles in their children's schooling in a gradual way. Often that means coming to meetings merely to observe. "There is one woman I could not get involved in anything. I started by asking her to make a dessert for the PTA. I worked on her for three years"—she laughs—"before I got the pie. Now she works on our book fair, our gift shop, and she has sat on the SPMT.

"To get her to come to the SPMT, I told her to come and listen. That's what she did—she didn't say a word. She came to three meetings without saying anything. Then we had a discussion, nobody said anything at all for a few minutes, and she had a suggestion. It was perfect! Because of the reception she got, she interacted. She is not vocal, but she is involved."

How much parent involvement does Columbia Park Elementary really have? Walker's answer is succinct. "Enough. We have enough to guarantee a successful school year for the children, the teachers, and the parents. We try to get new people involved because there are always changes."

### *Columbia Park's After-School Program*

The after-school program that Walker coordinates was funded by a grant from the county. One hundred and eighty children participate at no cost, and stay in the program from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. daily. The components of the program include an after-school snack, a recess, homework help, enrichment activities, and five counselors who are on hand to work with children on topics that include drug awareness, drug prevention, self-esteem, and strategies to resolve conflicts without fighting.

Other grants have included money for a reading workshop, which Walker describes as contributing to the improvement in reading scores. "We cannot prove it, but everything points to it. We showed parents how to do things with their kids at home without buying expensive equipment or materials, just using simple things like the newspaper, the comics, the macaroni box. The PTA worked with the reading specialists and four or five other teachers."

### *A Renewed Sense of Community*

Changes in the neighborhood surrounding Columbia Park Elementary are marked, Walker says, since 1985. "This was a horrible-looking place. The streets were dirty, trashed. There were boarded-up houses. We had a couple of houses right across from the school where drugs were going on. People hung out on the street.

"When Mrs. Green came, the school dumpster was so overflowing that it had ugly mattresses and broken metal hanging out of it. The kids were walking through this," Walker says indignantly, "and it was pitiful!"

One of Green's most powerful acts was to join the community's civic organization. Walker remembers the reaction when Green first attended a meeting. "Everybody was shocked when they saw the principal of the school walk in because the principal is white and this is a black neighborhood."

Her voice is somewhat plaintive as she continues. "Before, the school was always separate from us. Now when we have a community affair, Mrs. Green and some of the teachers come. This never happened before. Everybody feels like this is a *community* now."

The change in the school's appearance reflects other, more profound changes. "Now it has a manicured lawn. We planted flowers, trimmed trees, and had a clean-up day. Mrs. Green came in her jeans, right along with everybody else, and we picked up glass and trash. She got a new dumpster with a lid on it so people can't just dump stuff in it anymore and it looks *beautiful*. It looks"—Walker is proud—"like a *school* on the outside. And when you walk in the door, people in the halls say, 'Hi, how are you today? Do you need to know where the office is?'"

The friendliness in the school is important to parents. "When you walk into some schools nobody says anything to you," Walker reflects. "Everybody avoids your eyes."

Another sign of change is a shift in the racial composition of the school's staff. "When I first came to the school, most teachers were white. It's probably more like 65:35 now.

"The kids are exposed to a variety of nationalities and races. We also have a goal of balancing men and women. Doing this reflects the way the world is now—it's better for the kids."

The most eloquent testimonial a parent could give is provided by Walker. "When we first lived here, we lived in apartments. The boundaries changed, and we were going to have to send my daughter to a different school. I refused. For a year we got a special transfer, and then we were able to buy a house. We turned down eight houses because if they weren't in the Columbia Park boundaries, we gave them up." ■



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# Selected Readings on Parental Involvement

*compiled by David Chawszczewski*

• Becker, H. J., & Epstein, J. L. (1982). Parent involvement: A survey of teacher practices. *The Elementary School Journal, 83*(2), 85-102.

*Becker and Epstein report the results of a large survey of elementary school practitioners on the topic of parent involvement beliefs and techniques. While they show wide variation, a common wisdom is reflected in the results. Interesting questions about the source and veracity of beliefs are raised, as well as the obstacles to communication among teachers and between teachers and parents.*

• Chrispeels, J. H. (1991). District leadership in parent involvement: Policies and actions in San Diego. *Phi Delta Kappan, 72*(5), 367-371.

*Chrispeels describes recent approaches taken in California to improve parent-school relations, especially concerning minorities. Noting the importance of adopting "a clearer definition of parent involvement" among agencies, she provides examples of the implementation of policy at the state, county, and district levels. The means described aim generally at establishing and maintaining communication through conferences, incentives, and inservice. The strengths and weaknesses of the approach are also considered.*

• Clark, R. M. (1988). Parents as providers of linguistic and social capital. *Educational Horizons, 66*(2), 93-95.

*Drawing upon case studies of minority students, Clark makes the case that achievement is influenced by the continued, consistent, and adaptive role of parents in intellectual activities. To counter the trend of parents to withdraw such support as children age, it is suggested that schools "include ways for teachers to share information that empowers parents to function as effective mentors in the family."*

• Comer, J. P. (1986). Parent participation in the schools. *Phi Delta Kappan, 67*(6), 442-446.

*After outlining the impediments to parent-teacher interaction, Comer presents a plan for recreating lost connections. Several effective programs in New Haven that emphasize inviting parent involvement are described. Participants were able to restore trust, respect, and achieve agreement, with clear academic, social, and psychological gains for the school community.*

• *Education Week.* (1990). *Parents as partners: Redefining the family/school social contract.* [Special report.] Washington, DC: Author.

*This special report on issues related to parent involvement is a comprehensive survey of current thinking, research, and developments in the field. Divided into four main sections that include redefinition, aid to families, initiatives, and parents' exercise of power, the reporting brings together noted theorists, various resources, and numerous statistics. It includes information on diverse projects, ideas and suggestions, reports on the roles of non-school agencies, and a comprehensive look at recent reforms in Chicago. Two bibliographies are also included.*

• Epstein, J. L., & Becker, H. J. (1982). Teachers' reported practices of parent involvement: Problems and possibilities. *The Elementary School Journal, 83*(2), 103-113.

*Using teacher comments from a large-scale survey, the authors outline and illustrate a number of important beliefs about parents that are held by practitioners. Among the issues are those of time, benefits, problems encountered, and differences within groups. A lengthy discussion of successful techniques and further questions is included.*

• McLaughlin, M. W., & Shields, P. M. (1987). Involving low-income parents in the schools: A role for policy? *Phi Delta Kappan, 69*(2), 156-160.

*McLaughlin and Shields discuss various aspects of parent involvement among the less advantaged as an issue in educational policy. They note that certain strategies work, that involvement is an increasingly important priority, and that policy can have an impact on implementation. They also provide appropriate examples and conclude with specific recommendations for educating stakeholders and establishing rules in order to influence their beliefs.*



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*"It may be tough at times,*
*but the end result will help the kids..."*



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# Forging a New Frontier



*A combination of resources—and an ingenious vision—brought together parents, elementary and high school teachers, university faculty, and a school principal in a shared, concrete goal—and the means to accomplish it — for an elementary school's curriculum and instruction. In this article Douglas Schamel, an Instructor in the School of Natural Resources at the University of Alaska—Fairbanks, discusses an unusual partnership between university faculty and elementary school teachers.*

At the Denali Elementary School in Fairbanks, Alaska, a creative welding of resources has forged a vital partnership between university faculty and school staff—a partnership constructed to improve teachers' ability to teach the school's science and math curriculum.

Approximately 450 students from diverse backgrounds are enrolled at the Denali School, which is one of twenty elementary schools in Fairbanks. Alaskan natives comprise about twenty-five percent of the students. Ten percent are African-American, ten percent are Asian, and the rest represent a cosmopolitan, diverse mixture of different socioeconomic backgrounds. As the principal, David Hagstrom explains, children of university professors and affluent parents sit next to children who live with their parents in a downtown shelter for the homeless.

Fairbanks itself can be considered one of the last frontiers—the Alaskan State Highway runs to its end about 75 miles from town and is replaced with tundra. Residents deal with long, severe winters of prolonged cold, dark, and snow. All groceries and other supplies must be shipped from Seattle. In some ways, the community has a different spirit—a pioneer ethos of pulling together to overcome obstacles—that in part may be caused by its geography.

### *The Genesis of a Partnership*

A partnership between elementary school teachers and university faculty to strengthen science and math curriculum might seem like an odd sort of collaboration. Could university faculty in scientific disciplines communicate with elementary school teachers so that their knowledge needs would be adequately met? Would university faculty's orientation to inservice be too theoretical, too abstract for the instructional purposes of an elementary school? How much would elementary school teachers benefit from such an experience so that they, in turn, could see gains in children's knowledge?

Douglas Schamel, an Instructor in the School of Natural Sciences at the University of Alaska—Fairbanks, is a biologist and wildlife expert whose knowledge has been tapped to provide a unique experience for him, for teachers, and for the students at Denali.

He explains how the partnership began. "David Hagstrom, principal at Denali, was working to put together a format through which the teachers at Denali Elementary could receive what they wanted—namely to become more competent in science so they could become better teachers of science. He arranged a series of early morning meetings at which teachers, interested parents, and faculty from the university gathered at 6 a.m. to discuss what they wanted to accomplish.

"We asked how long it would take us and how would we proceed. During those meetings it became clear that the school needed to bring in a scientist to teach the teachers, not after school or at night, but during the school day."

Other life demands on teachers, such as their own families and after-work activities, precluded an after-hours approach to instruction. Teachers believed that for an aggressive inservice program to succeed, they needed to be fresh when they worked with university faculty.

Schamel was invited to teach, and a successful grant was written, mostly for funds to secure substitute teachers while teachers were taking classes. Teachers would receive university credit if they successfully completed the course, which would be graded on a pass/fail basis and offered at Denali Elementary School on Fridays.

### *Authentic Inservice*

How did a scientist training prospective scientists make a cognitive shift in order to work with elementary school teachers interested in tapping into the "discovery" skills of their students?

"It was almost a dream come true," Schamel answers disarmingly, "but it was happening too early from my perspective. I had thought about what I would like to do in terms of science education at the elementary school level, but I hadn't worked directly on it yet."

Plunging into the experience proved the best course. Schamel was invited to provide an inservice for Denali's staff before the school year began—"a little taste of what the course would be like," he says—and he decided to give them something unexpected, rather than a predictable lecture and discussion.

"I decided to talk about biology from the view of something dead," Schamel remembers. "I took in a dead vole (mouse), laid it on the table, and asked the teachers if it was alive. Therefore, we began talking about the properties of life by looking at something that was dead.

"Next, everyone went outside with simulated dead voles—in this case,

pieces of meat. They sat underneath trees or in places where I had placed pieces of meat the day before. I asked them to watch the wasps in the area and write down questions.

"One person in each group of four or five was designated as official scribe and instructed to write down all the questions that were asked. After a while, each person was asked to pick a question they wanted to investigate. We had four or five groups and five very different questions that were investigated by the students. When we were finished, they had learned a lot about the questions for which they wanted answers, but they had ten times as many questions as before, and wanted answers for those."

*Establishing Credibility*

Did Schamel experience barriers as a person working with elementary school teachers in their school? "The biggest struggle," he replies, "was that the teachers were excited but also quite apprehensive. They were excited because they thought what they would learn would be new and interesting, but they were apprehensive that I was going to come in and blow them off the wall with all sorts of terminology."

In fact, assignments that stemmed from expectations based on university teaching caused what Schamel terms a "quiet rebellion" about the fourth week of instruction. "I was giving them things to read and homework assignments that they had to do after school. The idea of the homework was to give them the experience—not answers—to get them to think so that when we came to class we could compare notes and come up with ideas to try out."

Providing instruction to teachers was considerably different than university teaching, Schamel readily admits. "Schoolteachers have a full-time job. Most teachers have a family and activities besides the ones that keep them busy at school. If you ask them to do very much after school hours, you're asking for too much. I had to learn that if you are going to do teacher inservice training, you have to back off from some typical university expectations."

But was he able to shift his expectations in a way that did not compromise quality? "It was accomplished without compromising quality, but it certainly compromised *quantity*," Schamel states. "At that point, I felt that I had some choices. I could say that if we didn't do it my way, we wouldn't do it at all. Another option was to cut back on the scope or depth of activities and have the teachers present to learn whatever they possibly could in the time allocated.

"I talked to David [Hagstrom] about it and we decided that the best thing to do was to cut back on the quantity and keep the teachers in the course. Our thought was that it was better to have them learn something than drop out and learn nothing."

Grading was based on criteria that included whether the homework that was assigned was completed, whether the one quiz given was passed, and whether the semester project was completed. The semester project was devised to directly bear on the teachers' instruction, and consisted of developing a curriculum unit for each teacher's classroom.

Teachers were given options as they worked on their projects. "They could work as a team by grade level, they could work across grade level, or they could work by themselves."

But the first time teachers completed their projects, the intensity of their involvement meant that they ran out of time. Again, flexibility won out. Teachers were allowed to continue their projects over Christmas and give the final presentations of their work in January. To Schamel, the projects provided a means to assess how well the collaboration was working—and he describes teachers' presentations of their projects as "the most exciting thing I had experienced."

Approximately 25 teachers out of 30 enrolled the first semester. Enrollments since Fall 1989 have dropped slightly in the Spring semesters and risen again in the Fall. A high percentage of teachers have continued through the four semesters that Schamel has taught the course.

"Because of that," Schamel explains, obviously pleased, "we've been able to do a continuing evaluation of where we are, where we're trying to go, and how many want to go in that direction."

One part of the self-evaluation that influenced the course was a change in the hours it met. "The first year," Schamel says, "we met mornings only, about one day every other week. People said it wasn't working very well for them. They were prepped for the morning and then they had to go pick up their class in the afternoon. During year two, we went to full days, but met less frequently.

"That changed the format of the course significantly, because it meant we would provide direct instruction during the morning with a block of time to debrief what people had learned. We preferred to debrief by grade level. The afternoons were set aside for people to work on their own, or work in small groups. Another option was that they could ask those of us in charge of the instructional part of the course to put together some direct instruction for the afternoon.

"For example, some people felt really weak on the process skills of science and they asked for information that would help them become better observers, or for information that would help them take their data and summarize it into graphs, figures, and tables that would be appropriate for their grade levels."

Part of the funding that Denali Elementary received for the program released Schamel from his regular university duties for one semester. After that, his only option if he wanted to continue his Denali teaching was to participate in addition to his regular university course load—a significant



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amount of extra uncompensated work—which he chose to do.

Schamel was careful to separate his teaching experiences so that his university teaching style would not affect his work at Denali, and vice versa. "At the university I am training professional biologists. I train them to be very careful observers, but in a somewhat different way, because the end result is going to be an experiment that needs to be publishable.

"However, some of the things I experienced with the inservice training at Denali gave me insights as to how I could better prepare my university students because I was looking at biology through different eyes."

*Collaboration Guidelines*

Does he have any guidelines for others contemplating a similar venture? "The most important lesson I've learned," he states, "is whenever you have a program that is going to demand teachers' time beyond the classroom, it's not going to function very well if the impetus for the program comes from someplace other than the teachers. They have to say, 'We want this program. We want it badly enough that we're willing to make certain sacrifices to reach our desired goal.'

"If they don't say this loudly, my recommendation to other people is not to embark on this because there will be a point where a time crunch will occur. If teachers aren't committed, the program will not continue."

As Schamel reflects on his two-year experience, he remembers, "There were many times when we could have ended the program. Every single time we backed up and asked, 'Is it important to go forward?' Every single time the teachers have answered, 'Yes.'

"This process is really like a marriage," he concludes. "It may be tough at times, but the end result will help the kids, and if we can see differences, if we can see improvements with the students, then it's worth it." ■

## Alaska's Discovery School

David Hagstrom, principal of Denali Elementary School, is a visionary administrator with a talent for mustering resources for his school. University faculty teach Denali teachers and students, local businesses donate equipment the school needs, and most recently, the Denali School was the recipient of a $750,000 grant from the Nabisco Corporation for its restructuring efforts.

He explains the rationale that underpinned the partnership with the University of Alaska—Fairbanks. "Three years ago, parents, teachers and myself had a conversation in which we wondered why the kids weren't the same within school as they were outside of school.

"What that meant to us was that they were such natural explorers outside of school—building forts, exploring caves and the banks of the river that runs through town. Our concern was that the curriculum of the school wasn't helping them build on their natural inclination."

This observation directed staff and parents to the formation of their goal, becoming "Alaska's Discovery School." Hagstrom explains, "What that meant was we wanted to become a school that had a primary focus on math and science because we felt it would correspond with how the kids behaved outside of school. It would give them an edge on their future."

But teachers at Denali had a typical background that emphasized language arts. "Very few," Hagstrom says, "had any science courses and if they did, they were minimal. We realized we had to do major kinds of inservice work for teachers in the area of science and math."

His next comment is succinct. "We needed resources, and the resources came from the university."

Hagstrom admits that he is "mystified" that teachers were open in expressing their need for instruction in science and math. "At our meetings, teachers were very candid in saying that they didn't have the background but thought this was an opportunity to get something they missed out on when they were in teacher preparation programs.

"By this time at the community meetings we had high school teachers and university teachers present and a relationship was developing between our teachers and the university and high school teachers."

He pauses. "It was akin to a kind of bonding. The teachers at Denali did not fear the university or high school teachers at all."

A school climate that permits open discussion of areas that need improvement—without indictment or embarrassment—is part of the solution, Hagstrom maintains. "We have a school climate that says it is okay to do this. But part of it may have to do with Alaska. There is a real sense of community here. A lot of that has to do with the fact that we have to be self-contained.

"It's really quite necessary to help one another, to take care of one another, and this definitely influences the spirit of cooperation that we have. Even if we compared this community with other communities in Alaska that would be more attractive in terms of mountains and water, I don't know of any that would be more attractive in terms of a sense of community."

The $750,000 grant from the Nabisco Corporation will fund a science summer camp for the entire community. "I know," Hagstrom predicts, "that we will tap strongly into lots of different university departments for that. We will hire a scientist in residence. And as a result, we will be reaching out into a new kind of partnership that draws upon Alaskan native culture—a partnership with our Alaska native community, where native elders will come and live at the school and teach native crafts."

# Implementing Collaboration

Schools that want to serve the needs of all students face a myriad of problems and demands that are often beyond their unassisted capabilities. One strategy that some schools employ to cope with these needs is collaboration with a variety of different groups and organizations.

In this issue, two excellent examples of these types of collaboration are described. Although these linkages were neither easily forged nor easily maintained, through the leadership of principals and the initiative of parents or university professors, the quality and ethos of two schools were transformed by a new influx of support that included innovative ideas and approaches.

These cases of implementing collaborative linkages illustrate the challenge of establishing such connections as well as the positive outcomes that can result.

As we have seen earlier in this issue of *Focus in Change*, staff at Columbia Park Elementary School faced a number of obstacles when they brought parents into more active roles. The ways its principal overcame these barriers is instructive to those seeking to improve collaboration with parents:

- She mobilized a critical mass of teachers who wanted to improve the relationship between home and school, but she did not wait until everyone bought into the process.
- New roles for parents meant that parents had real involvement in school decisions and activities.
- Grants were developed that provided funding for programs that involved parents and dealt with their needs, not just those of teachers and the school.
- The number and type of interactions between teachers and parents increased, making it easier to break down previous concerns, fears, and distrust.
- The principal became actively involved in community organizations, thus demonstrating her concern and willingness to reach out. Her presence also increased the likelihood that she would get to know more parents on an individual basis.
- Finally, the principal and staff worked to make the school an attractive, welcoming place in the community. Its appearance symbolized that its staff cared.

**Kent D. Peterson,**
*Director*

In these multiple ways, activated over several years with many different parents, the principal, staff and school developed a collaborative relationship that increased the school's ability to serve their students and the parents' ability to help their children.

The problems faced in developing a collaborative relationship with a university were also not easy to solve. The principal, school staff, and university faculty had to think carefully about the ways they interacted, the purpose of their meetings, and the timing and structure of those collaborative sessions. Both school and university people had to renegotiate roles and rules to accommodate what they mutually wanted to accomplish. To establish this relationship, the principal was active on several simultaneous fronts:

- He worked with teachers to identify their area of interest.
- He identified university faculty who were knowledgeable and willing to work with school staff.
- He involved school staff, university faculty, and parents in meetings that determined the purpose and course of the school's inservice.

How substantial are the outcomes of these collaborative efforts?

The benefits of collaboration are impressive for Columbia Park Elementary School. Staff now have more assistance, students and parents share an increased identification with the school, staff interact more frequently with parents and the broader community, and community appreciation and trust in the school's mission is substantially increased.

At the Denali School, its school-university partnership has stimulated the staff, who have profited from an authentic, enriching professional development experience. In turn, university faculty have learned more about the world of the local public schools, while sharing their knowledge of and enthusiasm for science and math.

Were these collaborative efforts worth the time and effort? In both cases, the time and effort paid off. The schools gained needed support, commitment, or knowledge that emerged from the new collaborative relationship.

Additionally, as these schools shape future attempts to build collaborative linkages, the skills and knowledge gained in this effort can be put to work developing new, more expanded collaborative ties. School improvement is often enhanced by increasing the collaboration between the school and its local community or institution of higher education. But such collaborative relationships will take leadership and skills in melding differing values, expectations and concerns. ■


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## For further reading...


Ascher, C. (1988, December). *Urban school-community alliances.* New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education/Institute for Urban and Minority Education.

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## N·C·E·S

The National Center for Effective Schools, housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is a not-for-profit, grant-funded organization whose mission is to help schools provide a quality education to all students. To achieve this goal, its programs are threefold.

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Second, the Center's innovative program of computer software, *Management Information System for Effective Schools (MISES)* enables teachers and administrators to use a personal computer to access information to produce student lists or reports, monitor students' progress and scores, and create a database integrated with a selection of analytical tools so that information on learning and student progress is available at the school or classroom level.

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## PUBLICATIONS

The National Center for Effective Schools publishes materials which are available at cost through the Wisconsin Center for Education Research Document Service. To order, please indicate the exact title(s) and number of copies needed. Bulk orders: 10% discount on orders between 11-100; 20% discount on orders over 100. Enclose a check or purchase order made payable to "Center Document Service" with your order and send to: WCER Document Service, Rm. 242, 1025 West Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706. (Foreign orders are subject to an additional mailing and handling fee.)

*New:*

Chrispeels, J. (1992, September). *Using an effective schools framework to build home-school partnerships for student success.* Madison, WI: National Center for Effective Schools. (47 pps., $8)

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SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
WISCONSIN CENTER FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN MADISON
1025 W. JOHNSON STREET, SUITE 685
MADISON, WI 53706

Director
RICHARD A. ROSSMILLER

Associate Director
EDIE L. HOLCOMB

Communications Director
ANNE TURNBAUGH LOCKWOOD

Consultant
BARBARA O. TAYLOR

Research Assistance
DAVID CHAWS/CZEWSKI

Design
PETER MANESIS

Typography
EMALYN CALOUD
IMDC GRAPHICS, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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